

**USEFUL,
USABLE,
DESIRABLE**

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Aaron Schmidt *and* Amanda Etches

USEFUL, USABLE, DESIRABLE

APPLYING USER EXPERIENCE DESIGN TO YOUR LIBRARY

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Introducing Library User Experience

► **WELCOME TO *USEFUL, USABLE, DESIRABLE: APPLYING USER EXPERIENCE***

Design to Your Library! We're excited that you're reading this book because we think that user experience (or UX) design is an unparalleled framework for improving and transforming libraries. By designing your library with the user experience in mind, you have the potential to deepen the connection your library has with its community and make your library a place that people love to use. Sounds good, right?

Before we get into the details of how to design a great library user experience, let's unpack this whole *user experience* concept first.

1.1 What Is User Experience Design?

The user experience is how someone feels when using a product or service.

Since most people interact with many different elements of a service or product, there are many different factors that impact someone's overall user experience. Here's an example of all the ways someone might interact with a company to buy a shirt:

- Email from company announcing a new style
- Details on company's website

- Appearance of store’s window display
- Signs and store layout
- Music playing in the store
- Customer service
- Product availability
- The fitting room
- The actual shirt

All of these potential places of interaction, these *touchpoints*, would have an impact on the overall experience of buying and wearing this shirt. If this organization is aiming to facilitate an enjoyable experience, it had better pay attention to all of these touchpoints. The goal of user experience design is to manage all these touchpoints so that, together, they provide a great experience.

1.2 Why UX for Libraries?

Libraries might not be in the business of selling shirts, but we do have a lot of different touchpoints to design. And the sum total of someone’s experience with a library’s touchpoints forms their overall experience—good, bad, or indifferent.

Here’s our attempt at an exhaustive list of library touchpoints:

- website
- catalog
- databases
- email
- instant messaging
- text messaging
- online reference
- telephone
- parking lot
- building
- library workers
- signage
- furniture/shelving
- materials
- programs/events/classes
- computers
- brochures/posters
- library card
- print newsletter
- advertisements

If you’re feeling some pressure, like there are a lot of library touchpoints and a lot of ways people’s experiences can go haywire, you’re not alone! The tricky thing about creating an excellent user experience is that everything counts. If your library’s services are irrelevant and your building is dirty, outstanding customer service isn’t going to be enough to facilitate a good overall user experience. If your building is beautiful but your staff is rude, library members are bound to have a negative experience. The best way to ensure that everyone is primed to have the

best experience possible is to optimize all of your library's touchpoints. Don't panic. This book will help you do it. Let's start by talking about the three essential elements of good UX.

1.3 The Trinity of Good UX

Useful. Usable. Desirable. These are the three essential elements required for a great user experience at your library. Let us explain.

Useful

This is the heart of the matter. A product or service must solve a problem or satisfy a need to create a great user experience. If you buy something that's desirable but not useful, a flashy new gadget for instance, you might use it for a while or on occasion, but eventually, it will probably gather dust in a drawer. Clearly this is an important concept for libraries. If we're not useful, we can't be important to our communities.

Usable

What good is something that's useful if it's impossible to use or a constant cause of frustration? Not much good at all. Think here of library databases. They contain some great, useful information but they're often difficult to use. Simply being usable isn't enough to entice people to use our services, but it certainly is essential.

Desirable

In order to really connect with a product or service, people must either need or want to use it (but hopefully both). If your library is providing a service that is both useful and usable, but none of your members want or need that service, you might as well stop providing it.

The thing to remember about the trinity of good UX is that you can't just start by aiming for one of the three elements. Nor can you decide that if your library is routinely hitting two out of three, you're scoring above average, so you're okay. Useful, usable, and desirable are all inextricably linked. Everything you do at your library—every service, every resource, every interface, every space—must satisfy all three elements of good UX, or you're simply not optimizing the experience you could be providing to your members.

Once again, if this notion leaves you feeling overwhelmed, take a deep breath. We're here to help. But before we go any further, before we jump right in and start talking about how to make improvements, we need to discuss some broad concepts. There are eight principles upon which the entire idea of library user experience is predicated. Taken together, these principles are the underlying philosophy of user experience design, and it is only upon these principles that we can build better experiences for our members. Let's explore each of them.

1.4 The Principles of Library User Experience Design

1. You Are Not Your User

The idea that *we are not the people we design things for* comes to us via the world of human-computer interaction and human factors research. In library terms, it simply means that we shouldn't be designing our spaces, services, or interfaces with *ourselves* in mind. Instead, we should be designing those things (and everything else) with *our users* in mind. And we most certainly are not the same as our users because we are library insiders! We know how things are supposed to work, and we bring a baseline of knowledge, experience, and expertise to everything we do that our users don't share. So if we design for ourselves, we're not only putting our users at a distinct disadvantage, we're also pretty much setting them up for failure.

2. The User Is Not Broken

Karen Schneider famously brought this notion to librarian consciousness in 2006 with a manifesto on the very topic of the user not being broken (<http://freerange-librarian.com/2006/06/03/the-user-is-not-broken-a-meme-masquerading-as-a-manifesto>). Once upon a time, the library used to be this thing that we had to teach people how to use. From the card catalog to command-line searching, finding information was shrouded in mystery and only a select few (i.e., librarians) had the key to unlocking the wonders of that mysterious world. If a clueless user sat himself down at a CD-ROM terminal and tried to figure out how to perform a search on his own, a librarian would most certainly intervene because, poor thing, said user wasn't schooled in database searching like we were, so there was no way he could be successful. We remember those days, too, and we miss them about as much as you do (which is to say, not at all). Thankfully, our interfaces aren't designed to be mediated by us anymore, but we still hear librarians making excuses for poorly

designed search systems by telling themselves, “We’ll just teach them how to use it; then they will be fine.” User experience design turns that notion right on its head and says that if someone has to be taught how to use something, then *it’s the thing that is broken, not the user.*

3. A Good User Experience Requires Research

It’s super easy to sit down with a piece of paper and a pencil and come up with a design for something. Every usability expert’s favorite cognitive scientist, Don Norman, uses the example of a bank ATM in many of his presentations and published works (see, e.g., *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things* [Basic Books, 2003]). When ATMs were first being designed, someone sat down and figured out that all you’d really need is a machine full of cash and a person with a bank card to automate the cash withdrawal process. The cardholder would insert her card into the machine, type in a passcode, tell the machine how much money she wanted, remove the bills from the cash dispensing tray, remove her card, and be on her way. Easy! And perfectly common sense. Except, when ATMs were first built and installed, people often used to take their cash and walk away, forgetting to take their cards, too. If some interaction designer or engineer somewhere didn’t stop to watch how people used ATMs, we never would have gotten those new and improved machines that switched up the process, returning your card first before dispensing your cash, thereby reducing the number of left-behind bank cards. By doing that little bit of research, by learning about the lives, preferences, hopes, and dreams of library members, and by learning more about how they use your library, you can adjust your existing services and create better ones.

4. Building a Good User Experience Requires Empathy

If we all did things the way that worked best for us, with no consideration for anyone else, life would certainly be a lot easier for each of us individually, but pretty awful for us as a collective. We mostly don’t live that way because of a little thing called empathy. Empathy is all about understanding someone else’s feelings and sharing those feelings. Idiomatically, empathy is walking a mile in someone else’s shoes. To create meaningful and engaging services that are easy to use, we need to shed our librarian perspectives and think like members. What’s more, we have to value this adopted perspective. Only then will we be able to gain the insights we need to create excellent user experiences. One of the best examples we’ve seen for how to build empathy for our members is “Work Like a Patron Day,” an idea started in 2008 by Brian Herzog (www.swissarmylibrarian.net/2008/10/07/work-like-a

-patron-day). The goal is to encourage library staff to experience the library the way library members do, by doing everything from working at public computers to using public washrooms. Activities like these can help us start thinking like members, which is the first step to really gaining empathy for them. The second step—caring about their experiences—cannot be taught and requires careful hiring.

5. A Good User Experience Must Be Easy before It Can Be Interesting

In the world of web development, *easy* before *interesting* usually means functionality before bells and whistles. So when you're designing and building a website, you aim to nail things like site uptime, load speed, and navigation before including things like galleries, home page displays, and user-generated content. Makes sense, right? Well, we believe that those ideas can be easily extrapolated to just about anything that is designed, from spaces to services to service desks themselves.

6. Good User Experience Design Is Universal

Universal design (UD) is a broad concept that aims to produce real-world environments that work just as easily for people with disabilities as they do for people without disabilities. The Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University has identified seven principles of UD (www.ncsu.edu/ncsu/design/cud/about_ud/udprinciplestext.htm), as follows:

- The design is **equitable** in use to people with diverse abilities.
- The design is **flexible** enough to allow a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.
- The use of the design is **simple and intuitive**, easy to understand regardless of previous experience or skill.
- The design is **perceptible**, such that it communicates information effectively to the user.
- The design is **tolerant of error**, such that it minimizes adverse consequences if used incorrectly.
- The design requires **low physical effort**, allowing use with minimal effort.
- The design accommodates the **size, space, and approach** necessary for use.

We like to call upon these principles when designing in both physical and virtual environments, since they easily map to online accessibility requirements.

7. Good User Experience Design Is Intentional

Try this: walk around your library and ask yourself why things are the way they are. Why is the circulation desk set up the way it is? Why is the reference collection (if you still have one) where it is? Why are the recycling bins where they are? We bet that the answer to most of the questions you ask yourself will be, “Because that’s the way it’s evolved.” Here’s a radical notion: everything in your library (physical *and* virtual) should be designed with user behavior in mind; everything in your library should be designed with intent. What does that mean? It means that nothing should be left to chance; nothing should be added or removed or moved or placed “just because”—every aspect of every physical and virtual component of our libraries should be designed the way it is for a specific reason. If that sounds overwhelming or exhausting to you, that’s because it is. But trust us when we tell you that it’s worth it and that your members will thank you for it.

8. Good User Experience Design Is Holistic

We once taught a workshop on UX design to a group of library staff, and as we wrapped up the session, an attendee raised a tentative hand and asked, “How is this different from everything we’ve always done in libraries? We’ve always cared about our patrons. We’ve always been user-centered. We give great customer service!” Ask any library staff member, especially a member of the frontline staff, and we bet they’d say the same thing: we give great customer service. There is a great tendency to boil down UX design to customer service because that’s what we know and understand. But good UX design is about so much more than good customer service. Good UX design considers all those touchpoints we mentioned above—not just how your members are treated when they walk into your building, but also how being in that building makes them *feel* and how your building enables them to *accomplish their goals*. For us, this is what a holistic approach to UX design is all about.

I’m a designer?

Don’t worry. You don’t need to wear a black turtleneck and square glasses to be a designer. Whether you like it or not, every time you create a library policy, bookmark, or service, you’re making a design decision. Think of design this way: arranging elements to serve a certain purpose. Many design decisions in libraries are what we like to call unintentional design or design by default. This book will get you in the mode of making deliberate decisions. The result will be a better library and happier members. For more about the design process, see chapter 9, section 9.2.

Pulse-Check Time

What do you think? Are you on board with these ideas? If you're not, check to make sure you haven't creased the spine of this book and return it now, or head right back to your library and drop it in the book return slot. You won't want to read much more because the rest of this book contains a series of ideas that are all based on these principles, ideas that embody this philosophy. If you *are* on board, great! Read on to find out how these ideas will help you redefine and redesign the user experience at your library.

1.5 How to Use This Book

Each of the central chapters in this book, starting with chapter 3 and ending with chapter 8, deals with a different type of library touchpoint. In each of these chapters, you'll find a brief introduction to the topic and then a series of checkpoints that tackles a specific element of that touchpoint. Each checkpoint will help you

- understand why the topic is important and how it impacts the user experience your library is providing
- assess the experience you're currently providing
- gain an understanding and some ideas for how to make improvements

Each checkpoint also has two types of numbers to deal with: a difficulty rating and a scoring system. Let's make sure you understand each before going any further.

Difficulty Rating

We've employed a really simple system to score each checkpoint to give you a sense of how much time, effort, and skill will likely be involved in getting to optimum performance in that checkpoint. Of course, we're well aware that mileage may vary depending on the library, but we've made some assumptions in order to provide a general guideline. Given our experience, we're pretty confident these generalizations will work for *most* libraries.

| Rating | Overview | Scale | Time | Skill |
|--------|---|---|---|---|
| ★ | A single-starred checkpoint is something that is fairly quick and easy to implement, requiring just a little effort. | Minor. Can be completed on the initiative of a single staff-member with no more than department-head approval and minimal budget impact. | A few hours to a week. | No special skills needed. |
| ★★ | Two-stars indicate that the checkpoint is a bit more involved and will therefore require more time and effort to achieve. | Moderate. Might require some financial and organizational support to complete. | One to four weeks. | Some special skills/training may be required to complete this checkpoint. |
| ★★★ | Three-starred items require significant changes on an organizational level and can be accomplished only over a long period. | Major. Will require a significant investment at the organizational level, in terms of financial support, cultural change, or both. | Anywhere from a few months to more than a year. | Will likely require extensive skill-development/training for staff. |

Scoring System

The other number in each checkpoint that you'll need to wrap your head around is the scoring system. In order to help you assess the current state of things at your library, each checkpoint includes a section on how to assess and score the experience you're providing in your library. The total score for each chapter is 100, and the score for each checkpoint varies from 10 to 30 points (specific instructions are in each checkpoint).

At the end of the book you'll find an appendix with a list of all the checkpoints. This list serves two purposes: it provides an at-a-glance view of issues surrounding each touchpoint, and it gives you a place to record your scores for each checkpoint. Once you've assessed all of the different checkpoints, you can use the tool at the end of the appendix to give you a graphical overview of the strengths of your library's user experience and where the biggest opportunities for improvement are.

Not interested in keeping score? No problem. While the scoring system is a great tool, using it is optional. If you're not aiming to undertake a bunch of projects right now, you can read this book just to learn about how library touchpoints impact the user experience.

When and Who

There's no reason to use this book in sequential order. If you're embarking on a project to, say, improve your library's website, go straight to chapter 7. That being said, don't ignore any chapters! The more touchpoints you optimize, the more engaging an overall user experience you'll create.

Whether you're a lone UX wolf or part of a more organized effort, you can use this book. If you're just starting off improving UX and your organizational culture is cooperative, we recommend forming a cross-departmental team. Start with some smaller projects that might have a decent impact and build on these early wins.

While we like to advocate for improving your overall user experience in a holistic way, if there's no hope for forming a cross-departmental UX team, you can also use portions of this book that are relevant to your own department. Perhaps if you lead by example other departments will catch on!

1.6 A Note on Terminology

Details are important, and no matter how small it might be, we need to think critically about every aspect of our libraries. One detail overlooked by most libraries is what to call the people who use our institutions.

Most public libraries use *patron* and most academic libraries use *student*. *Student* makes a fair amount of sense to us, but we're not sure why we've settled on *patron*. Is it because people patronize libraries? Or do we use it because it's a holdover from people being patrons of the arts? Either way, this is a legacy term that we use today because we've always used it. We think it's time for a revamp.

User is a common replacement for *patron*—and it's great for general or theoretical discussions about UX and the like, where we rely on the term quite a bit—but when referring to actual people, it's a little impersonal. Plus, it's fraught with implications: users can be people who don't give anything back in return; *user* often refers to someone on drugs (as in “drug user”); *user* is also pretty bland. *User* might make sense to us, but would you ever call someone in your building a *user* to his/her face? Probably not. Why? Because no one wants to be called a *user*.

Then there's *customer*. Though it's often unavoidable—for example, in discussions about *customer* service—we're not fans of the term *customer* because we think it emphasizes a transactional relationship, whereas libraries need to move beyond thinking of interactions with people as transactions. *Customer* is a business term that detracts from the public service element of what we do. We think libraries

should not only treat folks with a bit more respect, but we should also label them more accurately.

The best term we've heard is *member*. Not only does the word *member* have few, if any, drawbacks, it is also positive and useful. *Member* evokes a sense of belonging or even ownership. It implies that someone is making an active choice. It indicates that there's an organization in which you can participate and do stuff. Aren't these the things that we should be aiming for? We know of at least one library (Darien Library in Darien, Connecticut) that has already had success using the term, and we think all libraries should follow suit.

Since *member* best describes how we want people using our institutions to feel and act, and since it describes how we think libraries should operate, *member* is the term we will use most often in this book.

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